A person with her hands folded in prayer

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Seeking a Spiritual Escape: Spiritual Bypass and Scrupulosity OCD

         I was 12 years old, curled up in the fetal position on my bed as my tears fell onto my bedspread. I felt a pit in my stomach, and the heat of guilt, heavy in my chest as I had a desperate urge to confess to my mom that I might have accidentally lied yesterday, and that I had an inappropriate thought today. I believed that if I felt guilty, I must have done something wrong, and if I didn’t confess my mistakes or my thoughts to my parents, God would punish me, and eventually send me to hell. I didn’t know how to manage the guilt and fear that I felt, so I was convinced I was being spiritually attacked by demons. Based on what I learned from church and my religious parents, I was convinced I was caught up in a battle between good and evil and if I prayed and read the Bible enough, I might be able to rise above my bad thoughts and my feelings of guilt. This belief is what caused me to pray a very specific prayer every night out of fear of punishment from God. It wasn't until years later, as an adult, I found out I actually had scrupulosity obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and what I was doing to escape my uncomfortable feelings, was called *spiritual bypassing*.

**What is Spiritual Bypassing?**

             Spiritual bypassingis a term created by psychologist John Welwood in 1984 to describe how religion and spirituality are used to bypass developmental needs and painful emotions (Stone, 2013). Many of us believe messages given to us by our families and religion or spirituality, that difficult emotions aren’t meant to be experienced and it becomes normalized to bypass emotions. This normalizing allows spiritual bypassing to go unnoticed because it’s not seen as a problem. Instead of working through difficult emotions or confronting internal conflicts by getting treatment for mental health, many people dismiss these emotions with spiritual explanations (Cherry, 2023). Spiritual bypass prevents emotional integration and keeps us from being immersed in the complex experience of being human. When we bypass our emotions, it impacts our mental health, including repression, emotional numbing, detachment, and developmental delays (Stone, 2013).

**Examples of Spiritual Bypassing**

If someone has been participating in spiritual bypassing for a long time, it might be difficult to identify when they are using it as a coping mechanism. Here are some common examples of spiritual bypassing:

* Believing you need to feel spiritual, positive, and peaceful all the time
* Blaming unhappiness on spiritual reasons that make you a victim: *The devil is tricking me.*
* Self-blame: *I’m not seeking God enough, I’m not praying enough*.
* Focusing only on spirituality or religion to detach from the present reality
* Unreasonable idealism that is unattainable
* Using spiritual rituals, prayers, or meditation to “rise above” your feelings.
* Allowing spiritual, external signs or occurrences to control our actions, which prevents us from taking responsibility for our actions.

**Spirituality and Religion**

         Spirituality and religion are important to the daily lives of millions of people around the world and gives them hope and purpose in life. (Pretorius, 2011).Studies show when individuals connect to religious or spiritual concepts, we display less loneliness, depression and anxiety (Ineichen, 2019). But, many dogmatic religions with rigid worldviews, often view normal emotions such as fear, envy, sadness, anger, and anxiety as more negative than emotions such as love and compassion (Stone, 2013). It is impossible for individuals to meet the standard of feeling only positive emotions, which leads to feelings of shame and low self-esteem (Winell, 1993). If you realize that your spirituality has led to spiritual bypassing, it doesn’t mean you need to give up your spiritual practice. We can still use spirituality within our lives, without participating in spiritual bypassing. The key is to be aware when we use spiritual means to try and escape from feeling our emotions, and instead, learn new skills to help us feel and process our emotions.

**Spiritual Bypass and Scrupulosity OCD**

         Obsessive compulsive Disorder (OCD) is when an individual experiences unwanted and intrusive thoughts, feelings, images, or urges that cause anxiety, then the individual participates in compulsions in order to calm or escape the feeling of anxiety. Scrupulosity OCD is a subtype of OCD involving obsessions based on fears of violating religious or moral doctrine. Spiritual bypassing is a component of the obsessive compulsive cycle. Some examples of scrupulosity obsessions are:

* Fear of committing a sin
* Having bad thoughts about God
* Fear of going to hell or being punished by God
* Fear of being possessed by demons
* Needing to pray perfectly
* Fear of the loss of control and being a bad person
* Doubting what you truly believe about God or religion
* Needing to acquire certainty about religious beliefs
* Striving for purity

         OCD compulsions fall into four categories: observable behaviors, mental compulsions, reassurance seeking, and avoidance. These compulsions perpetuate anxiety and OCD symptoms; therefore a part of treatment involves slowly decreasing all compulsions until they are gone. Spiritual bypass can fall within any of these categories and become a way to spiritualize compulsions in order to neutralize any uncomfortable emotions. Here are some examples of compulsions involved with scrupulosity OCD:

**Observable Behaviors**

* Completing religious/spiritual rituals
* Confessing thoughts

**Mental compulsions:**

* Praying repeatedly
* Reviewing thoughts

**Reassurance Seeking**

* Re-reading spiritual texts
* Asking other people if your thoughts or actions are appropriate

**Avoidance**

* Avoiding religious services
* Avoiding reading religious text in fear of being triggered

**Treatment for OCD**

         The evidenced based treatments for OCD are Cognitive Behavioral therapy (CBT), Metacognitive therapy (MCT), and Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP). CBT involves identifying unhelpful thoughts and challenging them in order to find more balanced, logical thoughts. MCT is a practice in changing the relationship individuals have with their thoughts and feelings, which increases the ability to observe our internal experience in an accepting and compassionate way. ERP involves exposing clients to their fears, without engaging in compulsions, allowing anxiety to decrease during exposure. The goal of these treatments is to allow uncomfortable emotions to arise without trying to escape them or solve them through compulsions, which leads to less anxiety and better ability to function in day to day life. When spiritual bypass is a component of OCD, the key is to tolerate the feelings that come up and sit with them, instead of placing blame on spiritual reasons, or using spirituality to avoid the emotions. Feeling all emotions is a human experience and emotions need to be felt in order to process them and heal. Spirituality can be used as a source of healing instead of a means for escape.

If you notice spiritual bypassing is showing up in your life and contributing to anxiety, reach out for support from a therapist. There is a way out of the cycle of anxiety and there is hope for change and peace of mind.

Resources

<https://iocdf.org/faith-ocd/what-is-ocd-scrupulosity/#:~:text=What%20is%20Scrupulosity%3F,of%20religious%20or%20moral%20doctrine>.

https://bayareacbtcenter.com/are-you-really-healing-or-is-it-just-spiritual-bypassing/ - :~:text=To identify and tackle spiritual,  increase understanding on the matter.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-spiritual-bypassing-5081640>

[https://lonerwolf.com/what-is-spiritual-bypassing/ - h-10-types-of-spiritual-bypassing](https://lonerwolf.com/what-is-spiritual-bypassing/%20-%20h-10-types-of-spiritual-bypassing)

<https://lifeafterdogma.org/2020/12/01/therapy-religious-trauma/>